Family Outreach Series

Strategies for Outreach to All Families: Overview

Acknowledgments

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ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Early Childhood
National Centers

NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Family Outreach Series

Strategies for Outreach to All Families: Overview

This resource suggests research-informed approaches to outreach to families. State, Territory, and Tribal Administrators and system-level professionals, including child care resource and referral (CCR&R), child care subsidy, and other staff responsible for outreach, may find this resource useful for implementing an effective approach to outreach.

This overview is part of the *Family Outreach Series*. Visit the Child Care Technical Assistance website (CCTA) to find other resources in the series:

- **Strategies for Outreach to Families Experiencing Homelessness**
- **Strategies for Outreach to Families with Limited English Proficiency**
- **Strategies for Outreach to Families Living in Rural or Remote Areas**

Outreach and CCDF Requirements

The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) regulations require States, Territories, and Tribes to explain in their CCDF Plans how they will provide outreach (i.e., increase awareness of available services) and promote the use of services among eligible families with limited English proficiency and persons with disabilities. States, Territories, and Tribes must also provide specific outreach to families experiencing homelessness. CCDF regulations allow the use of CCDF quality funds for training and outreach on family engagement as part of professional development.

As professionals in early childhood and school-age systems, we will want to align our work with these CCDF requirements and ensure that outreach strategies reach as many families as possible. To be effective in our efforts, we may need to modify our approach to conducting outreach activities. We also may need to adjust our assumptions about the families we don't yet have the knowledge, skills, or language to reach, and about how we design and communicate messages to them.

Engaging families is complex work. There is no single, simple solution. Consistent, sustainable, creative, and holistic approaches are key to successfully connecting with families (Boag-Munroe, Gill, & Evangelou, 2010).

CCDF Requirements for Family Engagement and Outreach

§ 98.16(dd) Plan provisions.
Lead Agencies must include in their CCDF Plan, a description of how the Lead Agency will provide outreach and services to eligible families with limited English proficiency and persons with disabilities and facilitate participation of child care providers with limited English proficiency and disabilities in the subsidy system.

§ 98.51(c) Services for children experiencing homelessness.
Lead Agencies shall expend funds on activities that improve access to quality child care services for children experiencing homelessness, including specific outreach to families experiencing homelessness.

§ 98.53(a)(1)(iv) Activities to improve the quality of child care.
Lead Agencies must expend funds from each fiscal year's allotment on quality activities (§ 98.53 (a)). One of ten options presented is to support the training, professional development, and postsecondary education of the child care workforce (§ 98.53(a)(1)) including providing training and outreach on engaging parents and families in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways to expand their knowledge, skills, and capacity to become meaningful partners in supporting their children's positive development (§ 98.53(a)(1)(iv)).

Find more information about CCDF requirements at the Child Care Technical Assistance Website (CCTA).

How This Resource Is Organized

This overview is organized into three sections:

- **Building a Shared Understanding of Outreach** Offers a definition of outreach. Provides examples of outreach at the family, program, community, and State/Territory/Tribal levels.

- **Understanding the Factors That Influence Families' Access to and Use of Resources** Explores research findings to inform how we approach outreach. Defines terms to strengthen our understanding of outreach.

- **Creating an Effective Approach to Outreach** Highlights research-informed strategies that can enhance our approach to outreach.

Research-informed Strategies for an Effective Approach to Outreach

1. Prioritize outreach, and work to build a shared understanding of outreach and its importance among staff and partners.

2. Allocate resources and funding for outreach.

3. Create a data-informed outreach plan.

4. Develop or enhance "no wrong door" and "one-stop shop" policies, procedures, and processes.

5. Dedicate staff or hire (or otherwise engage) family liaisons or parent ambassadors.

6. Find out what service features are important to families you are trying to reach, and promote matching strengths in your services.

7. Explore and respond to families' cultural perspectives.

8. Create outreach messages that are positive and strengths-based.

9. Use consistent, plain language in outreach messages.

10. Use a variety of communication channels and media based on family preferences.

Building a Shared Understanding of Outreach

What Do We Mean by Outreach?

In early childhood and school-age care and education systems, outreach tends to focus on increasing awareness of available services and promoting their use. Early childhood and school-age professionals do this by intentionally seeking out families and ensuring that all families are included.

Effective outreach is data-informed and culturally and linguistically responsive.

The purpose of outreach is to identify families that are not being reached and to share relevant information with families, within your organization, and with community partners. Collecting, analyzing, using, and sharing data are central to ensuring effective outreach.

Outreach also involves promoting culturally and linguistically responsive activities that raise families' awareness of:

- High-quality early childhood and school-age care and education services
- Comprehensive supports for family well-being
- Research-based practices to support child development and learning

Examples of outreach:

Family level	A parent does outreach when he or she reads and shares with a neighbor a flyer sent home from school that lists summer nutrition and summer care and education programs.
Program level	A child care center conducts outreach by using a bulletin board to promote family awareness of events and services available through local organizations (e.g., health departments, hospitals, libraries, museums, and cultural centers). The center shares information in the languages spoken by families in the center.
Community level	A child care resource and referral agency promotes outreach by working with community partners to review local data about enrollment in early childhood care and education programs. Together these partners create a plan to increase awareness of the importance of high-quality early childhood care and education and the availability of financial assistance to groups of families that are underrepresented in the data.
State, Territory, or Tribal level	A state conducts outreach by sponsoring a media campaign (in multiple languages) designed to inform families entering the subsidy system about the state's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS).

Family Outreach Series—Strategies for Outreach to All Families: Overview

A Word About Terms

Reaching families that we have not yet been able to reach—because we lack the knowledge, skills, or language—requires us as professionals to think about what makes the offered services hard for families to accept or difficult for them to access. Moving away from providing information to families and advancing toward listening to families—and responding to their behaviors, attitudes, and concerns—can increase our effectiveness (Landy & Menna, 2006).

For decades, families that we have not been able to connect with through traditional outreach methods have been thought of as "hard-to-reach." The phrase "hard-to-reach families" implies that families are indifferent or uncooperative. This phrase does not account for the specific and individual barriers that families may face in accessing services. It minimizes how difficult it may be for families to access services (Crozier & Davies, 2007). Describing families as "hard-to-reach" also fails to recognize parents' perspectives and strengths.

Families are not hard to reach. It may be that our services are hard to reach.

This simple but powerful statement demonstrates a shift in how we can think about families and outreach. Many families (potential consumers) may perceive services as hard to reach because services seem to stigmatize or are not aligned with what families value or think they need (Katz, La Place, & Hunter, 2007; Sawrikar & Katz, 2008). Families also may choose not to access services that are not promoted or delivered in ways that are culturally and linguistically responsive.

By shifting our perspective and terms, we have an opportunity to support a parent's right and ability to choose what's best for his or her family. We can work to create effective approaches to outreach that value and demonstrate our respect for diversity.

Understanding the Factors That Influence Families' Access to and Use of Resources

The strengths, needs, interests, lifestyles, languages, and cultures of families are rich and diverse. When families face challenges, those challenges are often multilayered as well. For example, families may deal with challenges related to their children's development and learning, and at the same time may face challenges related to their family's health, safety, or financial security.

Meanwhile, the services and systems available to support families also can be complicated (Coe, Gibson, Spencer, & Stuttaford, 2008). Families may perceive or experience certain system- and program-level factors as barriers.

System- and Program-level Factors That Can Impact Families' Access to and Use of Services

Outreach may be impacted by:

- Funding levels for outreach and the availability of consistent funding
- Consistency in outreach efforts, affected by staff turnover or priorities
- Application processes for families seeking assistance that families find complicated. For example, families may have to complete multiple forms that ask for similar information and that may use different terms.
- Availability of staff with adequate skills, or access to professional development focused on listening, building relationships, and being culturally and linguistically responsive
- Communications that are difficult for families to understand or that are not provided in languages spoken by families
- Communication channels that don't match families' preferences for receiving information about services
- Waiting lists

Family Experiences and Perceptions That Can Impact Families' Access to and Use of Services

What families know or understand about services and systems also influences their attitudes toward attaining those services and whether they choose to participate (Doherty, Hall, & Kinder, 2003).

As you review the list of family experiences and perceptions of outreach, think about:

- What you already know and how you might learn more about the perceptions and experiences of families you hope to reach
- What program-level barriers families might encounter
- What family experiences and perceptions can be addressed through messaging and outreach
- What other kinds of strategies may be effective
- What program barriers can be addressed through messaging and outreach

Examples of other strategies include:

- Creating or enhancing policies and procedures
- Staff development about identifying and removing barriers
- Allocating resources and funding
- Engaging in new or existing partnerships

Families often don't know that services exist or that as a family they are eligible (Carbone, Fraser, Ramburuth, & Nelms, 2004). At the same time, they may have preconceived notions about services based on perceptions of or past experiences with services.

Families may:
- Have questions and wonder if services are relevant or how the services offered address their interests or needs
- Think that the support they get from family and friends is sufficient
- Feel fearful of the unknown, or perceive that the risks of accessing a service outweigh the perceived benefits
- Be socially timid or distrustful of government agencies, professionals, and other families based on past experience or other reasons

Creating an Effective Approach to Outreach

Given the diverse factors that impact families' access to and use of services, our approach to outreach must be flexible, multifaceted, and ongoing (Katz, Spooner, & Valentine, 2006). Along with the successful strategies you may already have in place, consider the following strategies to enhance your approach.

Meeting Families Where They Are: Research-informed Strategies for an Effective Approach to Outreach

1. **Prioritize outreach, and work to build a shared understanding of outreach and its importance among staff and partners.** Adopt a definition of outreach, and share the information in this overview to inform your outreach efforts. Focus on data-informed, consistent (yet flexible), sustainable, creative, and holistic approaches (Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2010).

    Include outreach requirements in funding applications (e.g., requests for proposals/requests for funds) and program reporting requirements. Build in requirements for using data to inform and continually improve their efforts. (See strategy 3 for more information about using data).
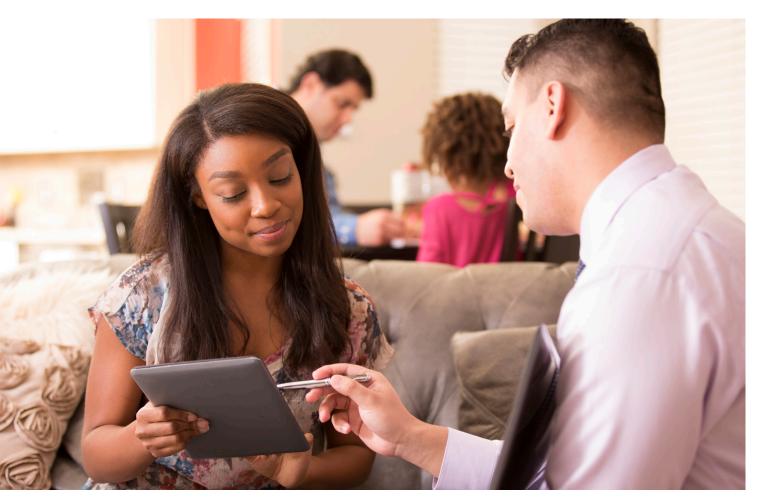
    Seek parent input, and consult with cultural and community organizations that partner with families. Parents can give voice to the unique needs of a community and share important details about their experiences. Consider ways to partner with parents and organizations that work with parents to achieve common goals.

2. Allocate resources and funding for outreach. Identify existing funding sources that might have flexibility, such as Title I, Title III, and state and federal preschool grants (Gelatt, Adams, & Huerta, 2014). Explore opportunities for new funding—for example, by partnering with other agencies, organizations, and businesses when possible.

What the Research Says

Funding: Adequate and stable funding contributes to steady staffing, consistency for families, and overall smooth service delivery (McCurdy & Daro, 2001; Unger, Cuevas, & Woolfolk, 2007). Yet when faced with budget constraints or cuts, outreach is often one of the first investments affected (Barrett, 2008). When there are long waitlists for services, funding for outreach may be cut altogether (Gelatt, Adams, & Huerta, 2014).

In a recent report on quality rating and improvement systems, half of participating states reported that there was no dedicated funding for outreach, or that funding for outreach was unknown or not reportable. Only one quarter of participating states reported having budget set-asides for outreach. Amounts ranged from $8,000–$315,000 (BUILD Initiative & Child Trends, 2017).

3. **Create a data-informed outreach plan.** Embed data into your agency's overall communication plan. Use data to identify the families you want to reach. Then identify the outreach strategies that might be effective. Consider data when creating strategies that address both general audiences and specific, segmented (e.g., underrepresented) audiences. Look to community partners to help you identify and collect data. Explore data-sharing agreements.

Identify the resources you need to implement your plan, for example:

- Data about groups of families that use or do not use services and, as a result, are represented/underrepresented
- Information about the types of outreach strategies that might be most effective in reaching particular groups of families

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Related Resources

Explore these resources for professional development, available on CCTA:
- **Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement Series**
- **Promoting Informed Child Care Choices: A Training Guide for Child Care Subsidy Staff**
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- New staff training or ongoing professional development about effective outreach and relationship building
- Tangible products, such as software, print materials, and paid (or earned) media
- Plans to track and evaluate your efforts over time

4. **Develop or enhance "no wrong door" and "one-stop shop" policies, procedures, and processes.** For example:

- Explore opportunities for multi-agency teams or cross-agency staff roles.
- Consider opportunities to streamline referrals between services and enrollment processes.
- Equip partners with information and materials about your services.
- Tap into partners' existing relationships with families or groups of families.
- Collaborate with other agencies to set and work toward goals to more effectively connect families with the services they value.
- Use both technology and staff to reach both broad and specific audiences.

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What the Research Says

Family-friendly Entry Points: Flexible, comprehensive entry points can make it easier for families to access and use services. Families often find services to be overly specialized or not coordinated with one another. Comprehensive "one-stop shop" services are appealing to families (VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996). A "no wrong door" approach is particularly important for supporting families dealing with multiple stressors and limited resources (Doherty et al., 2003).
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5. Dedicate staff or hire (or otherwise engage) family liaisons or parent ambassadors. Or hire (or otherwise engage) family members or parents to be liaisons or ambassadors to other parents and families. Ensure that staff have strong listening and relationship-building skills. Assess whether partnering with and engaging a community leader as a family liaison will be helpful.

What the Research Says

Staff and Liaisons: Personnel turnover and inadequate professional development often result in programs having staff who don't have the skills they need to provide effective outreach to families (Garbers, Tunstill, Allnock, & Akhurst, 2006) or to address the complex challenges many families face (Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2010).

A family liaison or parent ambassador may be able to connect with family members who have low literacy skills, limited English proficiency, or limited or no access to phones and internet (Avis, Bulman, & Leighton, 2006; Landy & Menna 2006). It's important to remember, however, that in small communities where privacy may be an issue, families may not feel comfortable working with a local liaison or ambassador (Craig et al., 2007).

6. Find out what service features are important to families you are trying to reach, and promote matching strengths in your services. Collect and analyze data from the families you work with or hope to engage in order to discover what families value. In your outreach messages, include basic information about the services you are trying to promote and messages about features that are appealing to families. These features could include such qualities as a friendly staff; clean, safe, welcoming environments; or a comprehensive, "one-stop" experience.

Use outreach messages to address how the service your program offers can make life or parenting easier. Also use outreach messages to communicate that your program has highly trained staff or staff who are fluent in the languages spoken by families.

Also consider creating messages that explain to families the value of applying for services even if there is a long wait list. Explain how their application (along with other families' applications on the wait list) can help accurately demonstrate the need for services in their community—and potentially result in more available funding for those services in the future.

7. Explore and respond to families' cultural perspectives.
Families' perspectives are likely to influence when, where, and how outreach occurs. Encourage staff to reflect on how their own cultural values and beliefs may influence outreach.

Consider whether a specific approach matches families' interests or needs. Pay attention to cultural messages conveyed through dress, etiquette, routines, and expectations.

Choose images that represent diverse families. Consider race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and family composition.

Describe your agency's commitment to being inclusive. Highlight the cultures and languages of the families you serve. Solicit input from representatives of the communities or groups you hope to reach more effectively, and work together to create an approach to outreach.

Consider how well the races and ethnicities of staff and families align. Explore how you might engage previous program participants as staff or parent ambassadors. Ensure that all staff and ambassadors are well equipped with listening and relationship-building skills.

What the Research Says

Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness and Interpersonal Skills: Culturally and linguistically responsive outreach recognizes, affirms, and showcases families' diverse cultures, knowledge, and experiences. Matching the age, gender, race, or ethnicity of staff to families is also helpful (Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1997; Gross, Julion, & Fogg, 2001).

Interpersonal skills such as listening and relationship building are essential (Barrett, 2008; Katz, La Place, & Hunter, 2007; Moran, Ghate, & van der Merwe, 2004; Forehand & Kotchick, 2002). Families may feel more confident and comfortable engaging with staff who are local community members and/or former service users themselves (Barret, 2008; Doherty et al., 2003).

8. Create outreach messages that are positive and strengths-based. Strengths-based messages reflect parents as:

- Effective decision-makers
- Resourceful users of comprehensive services that support child and family well-being
- Trusted sources of information in their families and among their peers
- Leaders who advance quality services and programs for their child and community

Use messages that affirm these roles as well as the role of parents as their children's first and most important teachers. Also train staff and liaisons or ambassadors in these strengths-based attitudes and relationship-building skills.

Related Resources

Explore these resources available on CCTA:

- **Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement Series**
- **Building Partnerships Series— Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices**
- **Foundations for Quality Series— Consumer Engagement: Using Social Media to Engage Families**

What the Research Says

Effective Messaging: Families prefer positive messages that affirm parents' roles as their children's first and most important teachers (Dumka, Garza, Roosa, & Stoerzinger, 1997).

In a recent convening of parents and leaders from States and Tribes, parents indicated a strong preference for outreach and consumer education messages that validate families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2018). Messages highlighting deficits or challenges are less preferred. These more negative messages may be associated with stigmatizing assumptions about families (Watson, 2005).

9. Use consistent, plain language in outreach messages. Consult the Federal Plain Language Guidelines for tips on writing messages that are easy for people to understand and respond to. Be concise. Be clear. Write as you would speak.

Consider literacy and reading level. Eighth-grade level is widely accepted for information meant for the general public. For easier reading, try to use a sixth-grade level when developing content for parents.

Use plain language strategies if you want to lower the reading level. For example, try using shorter sentences and words with fewer syllables. The Flesch-Kincaid readability test measures the grade level of your written messages. (Check your word processing software for a built-in readability test.)

Avoid using jargon. Be aware of terms we use so frequently in our work that we may not immediately recognize them as jargon—for example, "developmentally appropriate," "ratios," and "inclusive."

What the Research Says

Language and Literacy: Jargon and inconsistent terms make it difficult for family members to understand what services are available and whether their family might be eligible to participate (Doherty, Hall, & Kinder, 2003; Landy & Menna, 2006; Avis, Bulman, & Leighton, 2006; Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2010).

The use of jargon and inconsistent terminology across service providers also can alienate families and give them the impression that service providers aren't listening to them (Avis, Bulman, & Leighton, 2006).

A large, nationally representative study indicates that 82 percent of American adults have the literacy knowledge and skills they need to search, compare, contrast, and integrate information from print and digital text. These tasks are more complicated for the nearly one-fifth of American adults whose literacy knowledge and skills are limited to recognizing and understanding simple words, sentences, and paragraphs (U.S. Department of Education, 2012 & 2014).

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10. Use a variety of communication channels and media. Select channels and media based on how effectively each connects with the families you hope to reach. Use social media as a cost-effective way to reach families, and direct them to your website where, ideally, they can find more information and apply for services. In locations that lack ready access to a broadband connection, consider using a texting system instead.

Consider using print materials such as flyers, brochures, and paid (or earned) mass media campaigns (such as advertising) on radio, television, and signage to reach families with limited access to a telephone or internet service. Evaluate the effectiveness of print materials and paid media, and use them accordingly.

Promote services, provide resources, and build trust within local communities by going to where families are in their communities—for example, at shopping centers, parks, libraries, fairs, and festivals. Think about where and when families with young children gather.

Explore innovative solutions, such as partnering with local trusted leaders, employing cross-agency liaisons, or engaging parent ambassadors. Consider opportunities to connect with parents through businesses that employ the kinds of parent you are trying to reach (McDonald, 2010).

Related Resource

Explore this resource available on CCTA:

- **Family Outreach Series— Strategies for Outreach to Families Living in Rural or Remote Areas**

What the Research Says

Methods of Communication: Today, the majority of parents of young children are online and use social media. Through these media, parents often seek and find social support and parenting information (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015). Although according to a group of parent leaders,[*] some parents may prefer ads at bus stops and in newspapers as well as flyers as channels for receiving information. Face-to-face interactions through community elders, navigators, and family liaisons or parent ambassadors were also mentioned as being important ways to interact and share information with families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2018).

[*] These parents leaders represented Washington State, Minnesota, Michigan, Oklahoma, and Illinois.

Related Resources on CCTA

- Building Partnerships Series—Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices

- Family Outreach Series

- Foundations for Quality Series

  o Consumer Engagement: Orientation for Early Childhood and School-Age Care & Education Professionals

  o Consumer Engagement: Strategies for Engaging Families

  o Consumer Engagement: Using Social Media to Engage Families

  o Consumer Education Websites: A Guide to Creating a Family-Friendly Experience

- Promoting Informed Child Care Choices: A Training Guide for Child Care Subsidy Staff

- Relationships-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement Series

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